

Critique: Co-creation In The Context Of Social Ventures

Co-creation does not currently have a widely agreed-upon definition (Mattelmäki and Visser, 2011). Due to this, its implementation varies dramatically based on the unique interpretation of each individual. In other words, definitions of co-creation arise from different cognitive 'frames,' which are subjective lens through which the concept is viewed (Goffman, 1974). For example, when seen through a capitalist frame wherein the primary goal is to efficiently produce economic value, co-creation can be more narrowly defined as a tool to incorporate consumer opinions into design, leading to better public engagement and a more profitable product (Frow et al., 2015). Alternatively, a more critical frame that considers societal dynamics may give rise to a broader definition of co-creation which encompasses a larger ideology and social movement that asserts the value of creative togetherness above all else (Sanders and Simons, 2009). Each application of co-creation has its own distinct strengths and disadvantages. This essay will explore co-creation as seen through different frames, and critique its ability to contribute to the social impact of ventures.

Frame 1: Co-creation through the lens of status quo capitalism; the goal of maximising profit with minimal resources spent - Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004

In their seminal work 'The Future of Competition', Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) define co-creation to be a new framework for "consumer-company interaction," where consumers are brought into the development of their own customised experiences through the use of "experience environments." However, these experience environments are not described as necessarily being a part of the pre-market development process, but rather an experiential feature of the product or service being sold. An example used by them was that of Lego Mindstorm kits. While this paradigm of co-creation placed the company and consumer on a more equal standing than before by valuing the quality of consumer experience, their roles remained distinctly separate. It was also presented as a necessary economic adaptation to wider sociocultural changes happening at the time; particularly the rising democratisation of information and an increasing market demand for transparency and fairness. While this definition of co-creation introduced many forward-thinking ideas that presented radical advantages for companies at the time, it uncritically upheld potentially harmful capitalist ideals.

For example, this form of co-creation can facilitate the 'IKEA effect' wherein consumers assign greater value to products they invested effort into, which fosters greater fulfilment (Norton, Mochon, and Ariely, 2012) and bolsters the company's public image. However, the value generated from consumer creativity and labour accrues toward the firm, leaving consumers financially uncompensated or depleted. This is unfair within a capitalist framework of exchange, and may be seen as exploitation (Ind and Coates, 2013). Co-creation can also help foster an innovative culture within firms as they consider their products more deeply and take inspiration from consumers' ideas, which tend to be more original and useful than those of professionals (Matthing, Sandén, and Edvardsson, 2004). This can be a positive outcome unto itself, as innovative practices can foster a more open work environment and better feedback systems (Ruppel and Harrington, 2000). However, Prahalad and Ramaswamy's framing of co-creation as primarily a competitive market strategy centres profit as the paramount end-result. Due to this, other positive outcomes would be incidental and dependent on their contribution towards the primary aim. While this paradigm of co-creation may be easy to adopt as it cooperates with conventional economic systems, it also implies a reductionistic, monetary view of value. Social value is not adequately considered or prioritised, making this application of the concept a poor choice for social ventures.

Frame 2: Co-creation through a radical lens; the goal of facilitating collective creativity and a social movement - Sanders and Simons, 2009

Another notion of co-creation was pioneered by Sanders and Simons (2009), who define it as “any act of collective creativity that is experienced jointly by two or more people,” emphasising that the outcome or even the problem should not be predetermined. The larger belief system driving this form of co-creation is also explicated, rooted in an inherent value for innate creativity and democratic social interaction. While three types of value (monetary, user/experience, and societal) are identified, societal value is prioritised as the primary outcome. Compared to Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s proposition, this paradigm of co-creation obscures boundaries between company and consumer, suggesting that all stakeholders share ownership of their work and interact without hierarchical dynamics. Co-creation in this form propagates virtues such as human-centricity and trust, but it also challenges foundational socioeconomic systems.

For instance, Sanders and Simons advocate for an approach wherein stakeholders are involved as early as possible and provided with resources “to solve their own problems, in the context of their culture and location.” Granting people such agency and ownership leads to higher quality solutions that typically also correlate with better business outcomes (Haugh, 2007). Additionally, on a human level, being treated with trust inspires joy. This can neurologically invoke a greater sense of belonging and purpose (Zak, 2017), which for some may be a primary impetus to life, and a more important outcome than those stated above.

However, this notion of co-creation disputes the very premise of present-day systems, which makes it difficult to implement within them without resistance or dilution. For example, companies and societies today are largely organised around managerial hierarchies pioneered by Frederick Taylor (Taylor, 2004), whose theories were premised on the assumption that humans cannot be trusted and must be managed. While this premise has since been disproven (Abeler, 2012), the pervasiveness of distrustful systems is likely to pose barriers. For instance, sharing resources with stakeholders before a problem or outcome has even been defined would be difficult to justify financially within a profit-led, risk-averse economy. Particularly when the primary aim centres around collective transformation, learning, and fulfilment rather than any tangible outcome. Furthermore, as capitalism is underpinned by clear boundaries of ownership and transactions against its transfer, frameworks of operation for community-owned projects are not commonly known. With such gaping contradictions, it seems impossible to practically implement the true spirit of this co-creation without large scale social change.

Frame 3: Co-creation through a pragmatic lens; the goal of harnessing its benefits within current structures

Pragmatism is an American philosophical tradition that values present practicality, while considering how consequences may arise in relation to the interconnected surrounding context that changes over time (West, 1989). This section explores pragmatic implementations of co-creation that maximise its benefits whilst being practical. As the meanings of ‘beneficial’ and ‘practical’ are subjective to the unique context of each venture, several alternatives appropriate to a range of situations are investigated.

Firstly, a new framework for co-creation may be formed by combining the idealism of Sanders and Simons’ definition along with the executability of Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s. This can be achieved through considerations and experiments that flesh out a well-defined framework. For

example, company and consumer roles could be anonymised to minimise the effects of power dynamics, or the division of ownership and presentation of information could be agreed upon in a categorically democratic way to better avert exploitation and co-opting of knowledge. This may be a more beneficial solution for relatively open workplaces and non-urgent projects who have the time and fortitude to negotiate and develop a new working system.

Perhaps the most popular existing implementation of co-creation is participatory design, which engages all stakeholders, not just consumers, in a long-term dialogue that spans across the design process. There is a pointed focus on creating a comfortable environment that facilitates authentic and diverse opinions (Schuler, 1993). It is also associated with concrete frameworks and methods such as Joint Application Design (Carmel, Whitaker, and George, 1993) and Experience Prototyping (Buchenau and Suri, 2000) which makes its implementation less ambiguous. However, participatory design tends to be succeed in cultures which already have good information access and flatter social hierarchies (Asaro, 2000).

Alternatively, a clumsy solutions approach could be utilised (Ney and Verweij, 2015), wherein relevant stakeholders are absorbed by a company for the duration of their projects using traditional frameworks of employment. This allows stakeholders to be fairly compensated for their effort, while enabling the company to function in a relatively agile manner using existing systems, as seen in organisations like Supersum (2020). The clumsy solutions method may operate better in companies who have access to a network of stakeholders, and exist within a culture that normalises movement between jobs to a greater extent.

The open source framework may be considered another paradigm for co-creation. This refers to products that are publicly available to be accessed and developed by anybody who wishes to contribute (DiBona and Ockman, 1999). Famous examples are Wikipedia and Linux. While open source products attract expert contributors leading to high quality output (Fitzgerald, 2006), contributors are not often compensated financially. However, studies show people who contribute to open source projects often have other motivations and are typically well-informed about the situation due to high levels of transparency within the field (Alexander Hars, 2002). Open source projects tend to succeed when they are entirely based on a widely accessible platform, such as the internet (West and Gallagher, 2006).

While this is not a comprehensive list, the approaches discussed above can be used to implement co-creation in a practical way. They can augment the social impact of ventures not only by improving tangible outputs, but also by propagating a value for fairness, transparency, and creativity. Ultimately, a venture's aims for social impact and what is subjectively seen as 'valuable' will form the frame through which their unique variation of co-creation is defined.

Conclusion:

Co-creation is an increasingly important topic at a time where social divides are widening, as it not only defines a better approach to design, but also introduces paradigms for a new culture characterised by shared experience, fulfilment, and trust (Randall, Gravier, and Prybutok, 2011). This shift toward valuing happiness and togetherness has already been in motion for decades (Inglehart, 2020), in tandem with the development of co-creation. As interpretations of co-creation increasingly pull away from capitalist aims of perpetual growth (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014), the concept may drive forward or be better adapted to future scenarios that function more sustainably. As explored through the different frames in this essay, co-creation can realise social

impact in a plethora of ways. Depending on the values and aims of a venture, co-creation can be appropriately contextualised and used to fulfil a purpose.

Reflection

I chose to centre my critique around the concept of co-creation because I have always been interested in meaning and how it is shared between people. It seems to be the epicentre of elusive concepts such as purpose, fulfilment, belonging, etc. that have been represented in many ways across disciplines and cultures. For example, the concept of distributed cognition in computer science and sociology, or 'Indra's net' in Hindu/Buddhist theology, which each recognise the deep feeling of a larger social consciousness. I felt co-creation might present ideas on realising this consciousness in an actionable way, which was exciting for me to explore. Particularly as co-creation also aligns with my personal vision for the impact of a venture, which would be centred around safety, connection, and creative freedom.

My initial impression of co-creation was that it was a defined set of methods within research and design that could be used to make the output product better. Within our project, we chose to incorporate card sorting for this reason, which was our only explicit implementation of co-creation. Despite not being given anything in return, our participants were ostensibly satisfied with just having a good time for something they considered worthwhile. Sharing this sense of purpose in a playful and creative environment gave us a glimpse of the abstract 'creative togetherness' described by researchers, which helped me understand the intentions of co-creation more intuitively. While we did not name it, we utilised other co-creative principles implicitly throughout the project. For example, we began formally engaging stakeholders very early in our process, and maintained dialogue with them until the project ended. Even informally, we noticed that everyone around us had things to say about recruitment and work, and our team often discussed interesting ideas that had come from everyday conversations. We also had meticulous methods to ensure that our primary research was properly considered through every decision. This mindset helped us develop a well-evidenced and well-liked concept.

However, all the people who added knowledge to our project belonged to our social circles and therefore were likely to have a worldview relatively similar to us. Considering that one of our primary aims was to make the world of work more inclusive, our work could have greatly benefited from the inclusion of more diverse perspectives, particularly from more disadvantaged groups. The fact that we did not have direct access to such stakeholders was seen somewhat as a constraint to our possibilities. There was a specific instance where we were considering an idea centred around people who wanted to change careers but could not afford to do so, or people who for any reason were extremely disadvantaged in terms of their ability to compete in the job market. While this idea held a lot of impact potential, we decided not to move forward with it. In hindsight, I feel there were two perspectives on the situation. On one hand, it could be said our personal networks would not yield people who truly had stake in this problem, and we would therefore not be the right team to work on it. This was supported by popular discourse around problem-founder fit, which discourages the pursuit of a problem we have not personally experienced. From another perspective, the decision was made because we did not have the time or bandwidth, within the context of university, to build connections with the right people. Perhaps enough genuine dialogue and empathy could drive progress, and perhaps connecting with an experience that was different from our own would be a supremely valuable outcome unto itself. I personally feel that the ideological spirit of co-creation would better align with the second perspective, but that was not the one we adopted.

Having explored co-creation more deeply, there are a few other things I would change for my next project. This is due to the fact that I often find myself getting lost in technicality and losing sight of meaning; something I so greatly value. In our project, I notice my mindset tended to be somewhat optimisation-oriented. While I initiated and engaged in co-creative practices, I chose to do so because I believed it would make our end-product better; more inclusive, more clearly evidenced, more supported by a range of research methods, and not necessarily because it was the right thing to do. While this speaks to the success of how effectively design frameworks have embedded 'good' morals into best practice, I also feel that being more cognisant of the purpose underlying an activity would slightly change my approach. For example, in another card sorting session, I would focus a little more on making sure everyone felt welcomed, and I would prioritise listening over making sure our activity ran as scheduled. Of course, logistics and outcomes remain important, but I want strike a better balance between process (Sanders and Simons) and outcome (Prahalad and Ramaswamy) by paying attention to the present over the future, and prioritising people beyond the 'value' they add to a project.

As stated by Ind and Coates (2013), "meaning is always co-created," and the paramount importance of meaning should be naturally followed by a value for co-creation. Overall, reflecting on the concept has been enriching to me as it provides a framework for realising my personal values through action, and it is a practice I certainly intend to implement in all my work going forward.

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